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Feature: The Gifts of Youth

By Rahel Musleah

Guilt and history no longer bring young Jewish philanthropists to the Jewish table of giving. Yet many are participating – either through family foundations or as self-made entrepreneurs – passionately and purposefully, happy to be active and hands-on.

It is standing-room only at Public, a trendy, sky-lit restaurant in New York's Greenwich Village, as the crowd of hip 20-somethings clinks glasses of honey-vodka-lime Mule cocktails and nibbles on sweet potato pâté, skewers of feta cheese and watermelon cubes, smoked salmon spring rolls and crème brûlée in tiny cups.



This is not speed dating, although there is a certain amount of matchmaking involved in whetting the funding appetites of these young Jewish philanthropists.

They are networking with potential recipients of their largesse—representatives of 50 Jewish organizations chosen to be included in Slingshot: A Resource Guide to Jewish Innovation, self-described as “a kind of Zagat of Jewish organizational innovation.”

“We consider ourselves lucky and we want to share the happiness,” says Lewis Silberman, 28, a New York stock trader who, with his actor-wife, Ariel, is looking to target more of his philanthropy to Jewish causes.

Slingshot represents one creative effort to focus the Jewish philanthropic spotlight on Generations X (born between 1964 and 1980) and Y (1981-1999). It is the brainchild of 21/64, a three-year-old division of the Andrea and Charles Bronfman Philanthropies specializing in multigenerational philanthropy, and Grand Street, a network for 18- to 28-year-olds who are or will be involved in their family's philanthropy. According to Sharna Goldseker, the 32-year-old ACBP vice president who oversees the division, the approach brings together the perspectives of a young person coming of age with that of a seasoned person considering his or her legacy. “The very presence of the next generation causes a paradigm shift,” she says, “through the questions, values and priorities they bring.”

Though conventional wisdom bemoans the lack of Jewish involvement of 20- and 30-somethings, predicting a steep decline in gifts to Jewish organizations, Gary Tobin, president of the Institute for Jewish & Community Research, says, “Every generation of Jewish donors thinks they’re going to be the last one.... We have plenty of evidence that young donors are feeling their way.”

It’s true, says Tobin, younger philanthropists are as likely to be involved in the symphony and environment as in Jewish causes. But, he adds, “I’d argue that’s a good thing. Why would we expect Jews to integrate in every way in American society and not expect them to integrate philanthropically? Guilt and history won’t work on young Jews. They need a sense of excitement and purpose.” But this is true not only of young Jews, he explains. All Jewish philanthropists are changing because American philanthropy is changing. Directed giving—designating funds to specific causes—is now the trend, instead of donating to umbrella organizations that then disburse funds to many groups. He characterizes today’s givers as “more hands-on and active, entrepreneurial in background and temperament and unimpressed by typical donor-recognition events.”

Mitchell Whiteman, 30, a money manager, a member of Grand Street and vice chairman of Impact, the young adult division of The Associated: The Jewish Community Federation of Baltimore, compares supporting an umbrella organization such as federation to investing in a mutual fund instead of one stock. “Federations may not have the sex appeal as targeted or more ‘hip’ philanthropies,” he says, “but they go to our values more than anything else.”

“When you talk about basic needs,” counters Danielle Durchslag, 25, an artist and associate board member of the \$500-million Nathan Cummings Foundation created by her great-grandfather. “it depends on your definition. To me, creating a [nuanced] Jewish community...open to reaching out to as many constituents as possible is a basic need. It fuels the community to be the best it can be.”

Michael Steinberg, 34, is a portfolio manager for a New York hedge fund and one of the cofounders of the Natan Fund, a philanthropic network made up largely of Wall Street types in their thirties who pool their resources. “We apply our ‘best practices’ to Natan—in our analyses, due diligence and strategic thinking,” he says. “In many ways, Natan is a venture fund. Many of the organizations we research and support are new and off the radar. [We have] a wealth of cumulative experience... from business to entertainment and marketing. That’s very powerful.”

Founded in 2002, Natan has awarded \$3 million and generated \$100,000 in matching contributions in the past four years to groups targeting Jewish identity in America and economic opportunity in Israel. Its grants have helped fund Visions, a university program that promotes dialogue between Jewish and Palestinian Americans; Brooklyn Jews, a community center for unaffiliated young Jews; Hazon, a Jewish environmental initiative; and www.Jewsrock.org, a Web site about Jews in rock ’n’ roll.

Natan’s 55 members, Steinberg notes, “are not dissatisfied with Judaism, but disenchanted with its current philanthropic structures.” Adds Felicia Herman, Natan’s executive director, “People like to feel they’re in control as much as possible over where their money goes.”

While Steinberg represents the self-made entrepreneur, many young Jewish philanthropists today have inherited their wealth through family foundations. The number of family foundations has increased explosively in the past two decades. “At this point there could be 10,000 or 30,000 family foundations,” says Tobin. “We don’t know. But it’s huge. The dollars exceed \$20 to \$30 billion.”

“If you have the means, you should find organizations you are passionate about and give in a strategic way that will have the biggest impact,” says Durchslag, whose family foundation funds the range of Jewish arts, culture, health and environmental causes. “I try to give with joy and passion and not just obligation.” But just as Jewish identity is a choice rather than an obligation for many of her generation, she adds, so, too, is their philanthropy.

“Giving Jewishly doesn’t necessarily mean I give exclusively to Jews,” she explains. Durschlag sees it as a Jewish ethic to promote justice through debate and conversation, even in, for example, an inner-city classroom. She supports initiatives such as the Jewish Fund for Justice, an antipoverty and social justice group, and Children of Abraham, which builds dialogue between Jews and Muslims. In the arts, she supports jdub, an edgy Jewish-music production company, and Storahelling, a fusion of storytelling, Torah and performance.

“I don’t spend a lot of time with people, Jewish or non-Jewish, who don’t want to make the world a better place or to whom education is not important,” notes Jos Thalheimer, 23, an intern at ACBP whose great-grandfather began the Alvin and Fanny B. Thalheimer Foundation in Baltimore. “The question is how uniquely Jewish those values are.” Thalheimer says he grew up in a neighborhood that was “not mostly Jewish,” and his friends and the people he dates are also “not mostly Jewish.”

That open-minded, diverse outlook characterizes Generations X and Y. That means an organization that is Jewish in values, collects money from Jewish donors or serves Jewish clients does not immediately foster a connection.

“They have to compete on a level playing field with any nonsectarian organization doing the same work,” Thalheimer says. Ironically, despite his universalist perspective, the organizations he currently supports are Jewish: the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee and the Jewish Fund for Justice.

“Jews giving to secular causes is important—it’s part of our role in tikkun olam—but it has to be in addition to, not instead of, giving to Jewish causes,” contends Marcella Kanfer Rolnick, 34, chair of the Lippman Kanfer Family Foundation in Akron, Ohio. Her foundation is committed to “Jewish learning and engagement,” and supports Akron’s Lippman Jewish Day School.

But since much of the next generation is not part of the traditional Jewish community, “we have to find out where they are and get in that door,” says Barbara Dobkin, a trustee of the Dobkin Family Foundation. However, when she hands over the reins of the foundation to her own two children, now 36 and 38, she says, “I will place no restrictions [on them].”

Engaging young Jews in philanthropy is an opportunity mainstream institutions such as Hadassah can hardly afford to overlook. In addition to her own family’s foundation, which focuses on women’s issues, Dobkin also served as first chair of the Hadassah Foundation, which supports programs geared toward social change for women and girls in the United States and Israel.

Mirele Goldsmith, 45, a former Young Judaeon, notes that she agreed to be a board member of the Hadassah Foundation because of its “cutting-edge and innovative funding that speaks to my interests. We support causes not supported by the mainstream.” As examples, she cites Rosh Hodesh: It’s a Girl Thing, a self-esteem program now in dozens of chapters across the United States, and economic-empowerment programs for women in Israel from backgrounds as diverse as Russian and Bedouin.

In addition to its foundation, inaugurated in 1998, Hadassah hopes to bring in new donors under the age of 46 through a new initiative called Generation H, says Shelley Sherman, national chair

of the Young Major Donors division. “We have a combined women’s, Jewish, American and Zionist agenda along with collegiality and peer networking [to attract them],” she says.

One issue that has attracted young donors to Hadassah is stem cell research. The Hadassah Human Embryonic Stem Cell Research Center in Jerusalem, part of Hadassah Hospital’s Goldyne Savad Institute of Gene Therapy and one of the three leading stem cell research facilities in the world, was in need of refurbishment. A program launched a year and a half ago for young donors hoped to raise \$360,000 for the center over three years; it has already brought in more than \$750,000, increased its goal to \$1 million and mobilized local advocacy efforts.

“We wanted a cause that would speak to young women?” Sherman asks rhetorically. “It shouted to them. Many had never given a gift this big.”

Rishona Meyers, 34, was so taken by the project that she chose the highest level of giving. “I’d already had an interest in stem cell research; it touched on illnesses that affected my family,” she explains. “I liked the program because it focused on what young women could do. My parents raised me to be charitable, so I didn’t have to think twice about it when I made the donation two years ago.”

The New York office of the New Israel Fund, which seeks to present Israel’s moral complexity and advance justice for all Israelis, created New Generations 13 years ago for those in their twenties to early forties. “A lot of what we do is learning through our errors and our successes,” says Ariella Sidelsky, the New York director. “We draw people through content-based social and communal events, through real involvement and thought-provoking, sophisticated programming that shows people the values they hold dear in the U.S. are also relevant in Israel.” Today, New Generations members and “graduates” make up about a 5th of the New York campaign, drawing 800 donors in 2005 as well as hundreds to its events, programs and annual Israel trip. “They are now the driving engine of the organization,” says Sidelsky. “The investment has paid off.” A smaller New Generations has opened in NIF’s San Francisco office.

Some donors have responsibility thrust on them at an especially tender age. Durchslag, for example, calls herself “the luckiest young philanthropist in the world. I’ve always been welcomed at the table and encouraged to share my voice.” She joined the Nathan Cummings Foundation board at 18; three cousins in their twenties are also on the board.

“In my foundation young people are responsible and cherished,” she says, “but there are foundations where young voices can be threatening.”

“Foundations are complex organizations filled with conflict, compassion, loyalty and disappointment, [complicated] relationships between parents and children, siblings, friends and grandchildren,” explains Tobin. “One can hardly think of a more intense set of intersections than those between family, money and religion.”

Grand Street addresses these sometimes overwhelming issues. Durchslag, who was instrumental in its establishment, recalls a conference she attended for “young people of means” during her student days at Wellesley College. One of the icebreakers was to stand in the center of the circle and shout out an identity. Anyone who shared that identity joined the circle.

“I screamed out ‘Jews,’” Durchslag recalls, “and half the room walked into the circle. I was amazed. I realized there was a discourse missing.” She eventually connected with ACBP, which created Grand Street, naming it for the Grand Street Association, founded in 1920, where former residents of the Lower East Side would gather to perpetuate the memory and love of what came before even as they moved on to new endeavors. “When you’re 18 or 19, grant-

giving isn't dorm-room conversation," she says. "I now know who my peers are and have a network I respect and trust. It's a Jewish community I feel comfortable with."

At 21/64, the process of values clarification encourages families to articulate a coherent vision and set of goals, says Goldseker. To "unpack the dynamics" she uses tools such as motivational cards labeled with values from opportunity and responsibility to tolerance, justice and compassion. "When we invite family members to prioritize them," she says, "we find that even if their funding choices are different, their values are often similar. Dad might want to support the local synagogue while his son wants to support Hurricane Katrina relief, but the underlying values aren't that different. They start to see themselves on the same side instead of focusing on different vocabularies."

Kanfer Rolnick's commitment to her family foundation earned her the cochairmanship with her grandfather in 2004 and the solo chairmanship on his death in 2005. Her involvement began in her twenties, though her role on the board was then little more than rubber stamping.

"I decided I wanted to understand the field and potential of philanthropy and went on a journey of self-education," she says. To do so, she attended a conference of the Jewish Funders Network, which provides leadership and services to Jewish grantmakers, and later became an executive board member after chairing its Younger Funders program.

Kanfer Rolnick offers a critique of her generation. "I'm afraid we are giddy with all the great stuff we're doing," she says, "but 20 years from now our kids will say the system is still broken and the things we built are irrelevant. We have to change the way we work by modeling true collaboration...to usher in an agile, responsive, more resource-efficient Jewish community."

Even though many young donors come to Jewish causes from the outfield of community life, their philanthropic activities usually pull them in. Almost all of the new donors become more involved, says Laura Spitzer, associate executive director of the UJA-Federation of New York. Spitzer has worked with at least a dozen federations around the country that have started or are interested in starting venture philanthropy funds.

"We are literally educating and growing the next generation of philanthropists," she says, refuting the perception that UJA-Federation does not attract younger people seeking edgy projects. One such project is Six Points Fellowship, which encourages young artists to create works with a Jewish focus.

Tobin frames the debate between sexy and staid in a historical context: "Edgy, young, vigorous entrepreneurial Jews created Hadassah and federations and JCC's and Jewish family services and the American Jewish Congress. [They] created... Israel and Brandeis University."

And it seems that the young philanthropists also have a larger snowball effect. In 1917, 27-year-old Sarah Wetsman and her mother, Bessie, hosted Henrietta Szold for 10 days in their Detroit home and were instrumental in founding Hadassah's Detroit chapter; a year later, Sarah gave \$1,000 (borrowed from her father) toward the purchase of an ambulance to send as part of a medical mission that Hadassah and the JDC were sending to Palestine. Fast forward 80 years to 2007: Sarah Wetsman's son, William Davidson, has just donated \$75 million toward the construction of a new inpatient tower at Hadassah Hospital in Jerusalem. Philanthropy produces philanthropy.

Mitchell Whiteman characterizes himself and most of his peers as "incredibly optimistic" about the future of Jewish philanthropy. "Philanthropy can be making grants through a family foundation, giving a few dollars...or volunteering," he says. "If we don't take ownership of our communities, who will?"

While each generation may have its own motivation, even its own culture, the impulse to give is constant. "Over and over," says Tobin, "Jews re-create their communities and their organizational structures. This is not something new. It's something wonderfully ingrained in the Jewish spirit of change and growth."